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La prise de la parole de la mère: Marie Ndiaye’s La Sorcière (1996)

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It is quite common to find mothers and mother-figures portrayed as witches in literature, especially in fairy tales and *contes* – and this across cultures and historical periods. The witch is one of the ways in which the mother is figured as powerful, monstrous and, in most cases, bad (a wicked witch). In Marie Ndiaye’s novel *La Sorcière*, the mother is a witch, hence, I think, my inclusion in this panel on bad mothers. But, in Ndiaye’s case, I don’t believe that the witch-figure does signify a bad mother. Neither, though, is she a figure of the fairy-godmother-type of good witch. Nor is she a feminist witch-crone (as in Mary Daly’s radical feminist reverse discourse). In fact she is rather mediocre, ineffective. This mediocrity is quite surprising because, in contrast to most, if not quite all, of the papers at this conference and to literature more generally, the mother in Ndiaye’s novel is not portrayed from the perspective of others. Rather, she is herself the speaking subject.

This reflects a growing trend in French women’s writing – mothers are becoming narrative subjects in their own right. There are historical precedents of course: Mme de Sévigné’s letters to her daughter in the 17th century immediately come to mind; and in the 20th some texts by Colette, Marie Cardinal, Nancy Huston, Annie Ernaux (although those writers still mostly write about the mother from a daughter’s point of view). But the significant number of works published since the beginning of the 1990s, in which the mother herself is a narrative subject, renders this a new phenomenon – *la prise de la parole de la mère* – which I have been exploring

in other contexts. [This ever-growing corpus includes texts by Éliette Abécassis, Christine Angot, Marie Darrieussecq, Marie Gazier, Camille Laurens, Lorette Nobécourt, Véronique Olmi, Genviève Brisac and Chantal Chawaf, among others.]

Marie Ndiaye was born in 1967 of a French mother and a Senegalese father. She published her first novel in 1985 at the age of 17 and has published regularly since then. Her novel *Rosie Carpe* won the Prix Fémina in 2001. Recurrent themes in her work include family relations, heritage and inheritance, abandonment, cruelty, life in provincial France, a critique of consumer culture. In *La Sorcière*, the narrator, Lucie, is the mother of twin daughters, Maud and Lise. At the start of the novel, she initiates them into the arts of witchcraft, as her mother before her did for her, but this is, in part at least, a narrative of mother-child separation. Lucie's adolescent daughters subsequently fly the nest, literally, by transforming themselves into crows. The novel has perplexed many feminist critics, particularly in relation to the mediocrity of Lucie as a fictional heroine, as a modern woman.

Despite her exceptional status as a witch, Lucie's magical talents are rather meagre and are reduced to some rather ineffective clairvoyancy – she can't actually see into the future, just what is going on in the present, elsewhere. And she doesn't use this gift for much more than being able to see her husband driving home from work, so as to know when she should get the dinner ready! [obviously before mobile phones...] Her daughters, more talented, rapidly outstrip her. Critics have commented on Lucie's general lack of self-worth and the fact that she is betrayed and exploited in relationships with others, her narrow horizons echoed by the sad small-town *lotissements* and drab provincial landscapes within which she functions. Moreover, there is a concern among critics about the twins' apparent lack of a sense of feminine or feminist heritage, and ultimately the impossibility of interpreting a feminist message, or even a clear message at all. This is partly because feminism has had a

rather ambivalent relationship to motherhood over the years: on the one hand, valorising it as a special role for women, and on the other hand, denigrating it as an instrument of women's oppression. In the latter optic, feminist critics might be tempted to interpret Ndiaye's Lucie as a bad feminist mother, in that, in her self-depreciation, she may be seen simply to collude in her own oppression.

However, the rise of the mother-narrator in recent women's writing in France can be situated as a response to the strand of feminist thinking, which theorises women's continuing desire to have children but without sacrificing their own sense of self to motherhood. Some of this work emphasises the importance for the mother of asserting her own subjectivity, her own voice, as well as recognising that of her child [Jessica Benjamin on intersubjective relations between mother (or other primary carer) and child; Luce Irigaray's move from a situation of mother-daughter rivalry and ambivalence to a changed scenario in which the mother's subjectivity as a woman also finds expression, and to the revalorisation and reworking of maternal genealogies; Marianne Hirsch's seminal *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, in which she identifies the expression of an emerging maternal subjectivity; and Andrea O'Reilly's notion of empowered mothers, who nonetheless have to negotiate their empowerment in relation to dominant prejudices and stereotypes of good and bad mothers.]

My reading of Ndiaye's rather surprising yet original and creative casting of the mother-narrator-protagonist as a witch engages with the interpretive puzzle the novel presents to critics and is situated in relation to the broad context of feminist theoretical work I have cited. In analysing Lucie's narrative, specifically, as a narrative of mothering, and in paying attention to the internal dynamics of the text, I go on argue that, rather than connoting a bad or oppressed mother, Ndiaye's 'espèce de sorcière' (178) as Lucie refers to herself, embodies, on a number of different levels, the complex tensions of mothers as subjects, and as narrative subjects.

Stylistically, *La Sorcière* employs elements of the fantastic, both in the gift of witchcraft that is handed down through the female members of Lucie's family and in the structure of the plot, which also conforms to an oneiric logic. Nonetheless, in common with Ndiaye's work generally, the novel's fantastic universe is, at the same time, grounded in brute realism, especially in its *mise-en-scène* of the betrayals and banality of everyday life in contemporary France. Witchcraft in this novel, then, operates as a metaphor and a medium through which recurrent themes in Ndiaye's work are explored.

As several critics and reviewers have pointed out, Lucie's initiation of her daughters and the gift of magic that she passes on to them is an obvious trope for puberty and the transmission of knowledge about sexuality and femininity: the twins' initiation takes place when they are between 12 and 13 years old; the acquisition of the gift manifests itself in the shedding of tears of blood; even when wiped away, the red tears are betrayed by a characteristic smell; male characters fear the gift and treat it as abject; and when Lucie's own mother initiated her, Lucie reports that it was with a 'un dégoût perceptible qui me faisait me tortiller de confusion sur mon siège' (Ndiaye 1996: 15). The twins' ensuing flight is, in this optic, a literalisation of differentiation and separation from the mother as daughters assume their womanhood.

The foregoing might suggest that Lucie's narrative is merely that of a conventional experience of mothering, ultimately a tale of loss when the little ones come of age and leave. Here, the banality of Lucie's existence may seem simply to reflect T. E. Apter's analysis of modern fantasy literature: 'fantasy also serves as a means of escaping from habitual assumptions and expectations, but the purpose of this escape is to show how awful, how limiting and imprisoning, the human world is' (Apter 1982: 6). But this would be to over-simplify a highly original and complex novel. The title, *La Sorcière*, at once connects Lucie to a female genealogy – of

witches – and endows her with an identity beyond simply that of a mother, and indeed the novel’s narrative reflects that dual identity, since the daughters depart well before the end of the text and Lucie’s life continues its ups and downs. It is also important to note that Ndiaye’s characters are not fully rounded protagonists with psychological depth. Indeed, critics have identified borrowings from myth, the fairy story and the fable, and from the *conte* and African folk tales. Here, characters are, rather, character-types, functions or ‘masks’ in the author’s imaginative, oneiric world of exaggerated realism. These factors would suggest, as, indeed, Apter goes on to argue is the case more widely, that the seemingly negative effect of escapist fantasy is in fact a way of highlighting problems and emotions which ‘often cannot be differentiated by ordinary language’ (Apter 1982: 135). For Apter, fantasy literature does not ‘resolve’ such issues but serves to magnify and thus to ‘register’ them (6), and her points are helpful here for reading Ndiaye’s *La Sorcière* as a narrative of mothering.

The organising principle of the novel and of Lucie’s narrative is a series of contrasts and comparisons. For example, Lucie’s own weak magical skills are contrasted with her daughters’ amazing abilities to see into the future, to transform themselves into crows and even to magic away their aunt’s pregnancy. And as their magical powers develop and Lucie takes stock of the fact that her daughters are growing away from her, her sensual, bodily descriptions of the twins as children give way to more ambivalent comments on their adolescent characters. As they take their distance from their mother, so she becomes more objective in her observations of them. However, at the point where they are finally about to disappear, Lucie is overcome with the desire for physical contact:

Prise du désir soudain de les toucher l’une et l’autre, je les rattrapai,

me glissai entre elles et voulus leur prendre la main. Pendant de nombreuses années, lorsqu'elles étaient petites, je ne pouvais jamais me déplacer qu'ainsi encadrée, pensai-je, Lise à droite, Maud à gauche, et cette contrainte m'était parfois pesante. Je tâtai, de chaque côté, le bas de leur manche, saisis quelque chose que je lâchai aussitôt. C'était une aile, le bout d'une aile d'oiseau sombre. Stupidement, je poussai un petit cri d'effroi. Comme si, alors, elles avaient attendu cet instant pour en finir, Maud et Lise m'écartèrent puis, poussant le sol de leurs bottes, d'un même élan s'envolèrent. (136)

As Shirley Jordan writes: 'There are few more potent descriptions in literature of the desolate wrench a mother may feel as her children leave her' (165), and it is telling that this description includes a flashback to the departing twins' childhood, the moment that augurs separation producing nostalgic, wistful memories of times past – and lost. Through them, Lucie reconnects fleetingly with her daughters as her children, with herself as their mother, with the banal but good, limiting but valued, times of mothering little children, which are now gone forever. This passage evokes the sense that, in mothering – in parenting – everything goes so quickly. The flight of Lucie's daughters confronts her, starkly, with what she has already lost – the various stages of their childhood, the different phases of her mothering – and, as well as representing separation, it evokes a relationship that is constantly evolving. As Todorov remarks in his study of intimate relations, parents' loss of their children's childhood is irreparable, constituting an irrevocable change in their relationship. Lucie's narrative evokes the symbiosis-to-separation trajectory of her children's classic psychological development but Ndiaye's particular originality is that, to return

to Apter's comments on fantasy literature, through its unusual imagery the narrative both magnifies and registers the nuances of a mother's feelings in this process.

In accordance with the structuring dynamic of the novel, Lucie's particular brand of mothering is also situated in relation to that of a series of other mothers. First, there is Lucie's friend Isabelle who maltreats her young son – Isabelle functions as an anti-model, a bad mother, echoing other bad mothers in Ndiaye's work who abandon and maltreat their children. Second is Lucie's own mother, with whom she has a rather ambivalent relationship: a talented witch, Lucie's mother is ashamed of her own magical powers and she serves to emphasise Lucie's modernity and openness in the initiation of her pubescent daughters into the powers of witchcraft. Third is Lucie's mother-in-law; referred to only as 'maman', she is an example of a mother who cannot let go. She functions as a contrast to Lucie's ready recognition of her daughters' differences from her and to her acquiescence, albeit with resignation and feelings of emptiness, to their individuation and ultimate departure. Thus Lucie's weak skills as a witch and other so-called flaws as a character are set against a certain valuing of her mothering practice, for, in presenting these other mothers, her narrative implicitly defines her both with and against them, emphasising that her narrative is one among many different possible narratives of mothering and yet finding her, to quote Winnicott, 'good-enough'.

If it is true that in many respects Lucie does not shine out as a strong feminist heroine, she is nonetheless the middle link in the extraordinary female genealogy of witches that is represented in *La Sorcière*. Moreover, the process of separation between Lucie and her daughters represents a feminist alternative to the oedipal version of Freudian psychoanalysis. In Ndiaye's novel, the twins have, for the most part, been brought up in a banally ordinary nuclear family, with the material benefits of their breadwinner-father's dubious success as a timeshare salesman. However, at

their adolescence, their father, Pierrot, does not confirm their developing identities as women as Freud describes, or prescribes. Instead, their father's distaste at his daughters' assumption of their feminine heritage is actually the catalyst for his departure, and at that very point he abandons his family. And so, in accordance with Terri Apter's feminist work on adolescent girls, it is Lucie herself who confers on the twins the recognition they need of their developing female selves, and this recognition, from their mother, enables them to become independent, and to fly off to new horizons.

But the interpretive puzzle that the novel presents arises partly because the twins have no narrative of their own. Or rather they have a ready-made narrative or script – that of a maternal genealogy – but it is not clear what they do with it. Here, their transformation into crows is part of the conundrum. If the girls' feathered flight is a symbol of freedom, why do they choose to be crows rather than any other kind of bird? In the novel, crows largely generate fear, unease and anger, as sinister portents of evil or misfortune, and in some cultural contexts they are indeed negative symbols of witchcraft and magic. However, in other contexts, crows also function more positively, as oracles, messengers and omens of change. As symbols, then, they embody contradictory messages.

Thus, in *La Sorcière*, the girls' metamorphosis into crows is ambiguous. On the one hand, their powers of transformation connect them to their grandmother and to the family line; on the other, they serve to mark out their difference from their mother. The former suggests a family heritage, different from that transmitted by the bad mothers that are so prevalent in Ndiaye's oeuvre. The kind of magic that connects grandmother and granddaughters in *La Sorcière* renders them powerful in the world. The impetus of differentiation from their mother, on the other hand, points to an alternative heritage to that outlined in Nancy Chodorow's classic *The Reproduction of*

Mothering, wherein the very fact of women's mothering is considered to reproduce that cycle through the generations. Lucie's twin daughters, in their rugby shirts and shorts, in baggy jeans which hang from their slim hips, or in leather jackets and boots, are symbols of contemporary young womanhood who, they assure their mother, have no intention of getting married and having children.

But what of the uniformity that, crows among crows, the girls seem to embrace as they separate from their mother? How does the apparent difference with which they will live their heritage reconcile with their passage from sameness as identical twins, whom their mother could nonetheless tell apart, to the loss of their individuality on a wider scale, 'invisibles, disparues, confondues avec toutes les corneilles qui traversaient le ciel' (158), such that even Lucie is powerless to distinguish them? Here, Lucie's own fantasy, 'Et si elles [des corneilles] étaient, toutes, des filles comme Maud et Lise, me dis-je alors, de petites sorcières consommés qui ont pris leur envol?' (158), offers up the possibility that the girls – sisters – are identifying themselves with a wider sisterhood – the 1990s post-feminist generation of young women who may consider their rights as already given, but whose horizons are nevertheless in full expansion and who must carve out their own place in the world.

Ndiaye's *sorcière* may also represent what Jean-Baptiste Harang terms 'un prétexte à l'exclusion', and, indeed, otherness and exclusion are recurrent themes of Ndiaye's oeuvre. As several critics have already pointed out, although otherness is not explicitly related to ethnicity or skin colour in her novels, it certainly reflects the fact that Ndiaye is herself a *métisse* (half French/half Senegalese). In *La Sorcière*, the twins are described as 'toutes brunes' (11) and a woman in the immigrant quarter of Lucie's town hails her as 'ma soeur' (62). These small details are enough to suggest that visible ethnic difference might be a part of the inheritance being transmitted from

mother to daughter in this novel. Indeed, it stands in contrast to the light complexions of other characters described variously as ‘blanc’, ‘pâle’, ‘blême’ and ‘blafard’, including that of Pierrot, the girls’ father, who evokes the white-masked Pierrot character of Italian theatre.

But Ndiaye’s biography would also seem to enter into this fictional tale in another way. Given the relative paucity of narratives by (as opposed to about) mothers in French literature – and Ndiaye’s oeuvre generally reflects this trend – it is unlikely to be a coincidence that, at the time *La Sorcière* was published, Ndiaye was the 28-year-old mother of two young children. Her imaginative fantasy of mothering might, then, register – or work through – some of her own reflections and feelings about motherhood. It may also emblemise the author’s self-described sense of *étrangeté* as both a *métisse* and a writer who lives in the French provincial milieu that her novels portray. The gift that Lucie passes on to her daughters can thus equally suggest Ndiaye’s own prodigious gift of writing. And the novel may even plead the case for the mother as an exceptional figure, even if this is along the lines that we generally only have one.

La Sorcière is firmly grounded in contemporary French society and in the everyday, yet the open-ended nature of Ndiaye’s enigmatic family of witches means that the novel works on a number of different levels. Its mother-centred narrative of a matrilinear genealogy and its representation of the mother-narrator as a mediocre or, rather, benign witch make an intervention into feminist thinking and offer insights into maternal subjectivity, suggesting a self-defining dynamic – a tension between power and powerlessness. Sara Ruddick calls our attention to this dynamic in *Maternal Thinking*: ‘From a mother’s point of view, maternal powerlessness is very real indeed. Yet adults are not hallucinating when they remember their mothers as having immense power over their physical activities and emotional lives’ (Ruddick

1995: 35). This sense of powerlessness on the part of mothers is not simply a lack of self-worth, which is how some critics have interpreted it in Ndiaye's Lucie, but rather a sense of powerlessness in the face of, on the one hand, the responsibilities, challenges and practicalities of everyday life with small children (and big children for that matter), and, on the other, a sense of powerlessness in the face of the all-pervasive, yet unattainable, stereotypes of the good mother which impact on women's day to day mothering. The originality of Ndiaye's mother-witch figure is that this dynamic does not represent an opposition between the poles of power and powerlessness but, rather, a kind of resolution, to the extent that they co-exist and hold each other in check.

Moreover, the contrasts and comparisons that form the internal organising structure of the novel echo the dynamic of identification and differentiation that characterises mother-daughter relations, which is thus part of the very texture – the textuality – of the text. This would suggest that Ndiaye's exceptional and at once unexceptional mother-witch-narrator embodies the complex tensions, not only of mothers as subjects, but also of mothers as *narrative* subjects. For several contemporary French authors have written about the riskiness – the transgression, the betrayal – of writing about mothering from the perspective of a mother. The intensity of emotional and political investments in mothers in Western culture, to which this conference itself admirably attests, means that mothers' own narratives of mothering receive a mixed reception: there is a cultural sense of not wanting to know what mothers have to say, which is to do with both depreciation and fear.

However, in Ndiaye's case, perhaps the mother's *prise de la parole* in *La Sorcière* signifies that she will have the last word, and I think this is where the novel's feminist message – if there is one – ultimately lies. Although the text doesn't tell us what happens to Lucie's twin daughters, the themes that recur elsewhere in Ndiaye's

work enable some speculation. In *La Sorcière*, Lucie's twins flex their wings and fly, but Ndiaye's earlier novel *En famille* portrays an ongoing circularity, in the heroine's wandering quest to reclaim her place in her family, suggesting, perhaps, that Maud and Lise are ultimately destined to return. However, whether Lucie would be ready to mother them again is a different question altogether, since another common feature of Ndiaye's work is that, once their daughters have flown the nest, mothers too move on, enthusiastically, to embrace new relationships, new families, new lives...

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